

AMERICA'S A MAZE IN CAPITALISM

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The USA's campaign season remains a puzzling labyrinth, but one less appealing than Jim Henson's "a 'mazing tale of never-ending fantasy." Cartoon for *Puck* magazine's March 11, 1896 issue by Charles Jay Taylor. Public domain.

Michael Gallagher considers the relatively low inflation rates of the period "from Reagan's second term through Trump's" first to be "America's amazing capitalism" (*Queens Chronicle*, September 5), sarcastically suggesting that "for 35 years ... the robber barons of industry didn't realize they could set their prices and gouge more money from the American people," only getting the notion after the inauguration of noted anti-capitalist Joe Biden.

Gallagher makes no mention of Biden's vice president, but the candidate Donald Trump dubs "Comrade Kamala Harris" will presumably carry forth such a break from said "amazing capitalism." Meanwhile, a September 4 *USA Today* headline crows: "Goldman Sachs says Comrade Kamala is better for economy. She can't even do communism right!"

By the standards of 2024 mud-slinging, the ranks of Reds could include even Ronald Reagan himself. When not lauding workers' "cooperative effort aimed at sharing in the ownership of the new wealth being produced" or being photographed under a towering statue of Vladimir Lenin at Moscow State University, the Gipper occasionally paraphrased a remark by socialist intellectual George Bernard Shaw. "A government which robs Peter to pay Paul can always depend on the support of Paul" was Shaw's way of explaining to readers of *Everybody's Political What's What?* how inflationary policies remained popular when inevitably "the return to normal prices rescues pensioners from destitution; but it ruins debtors, making the cure as calamitous as the disease, Paul being now robbed to pay Peter."

That sounds more like something one might expect to hear from such a free-market advocate as Henry Hazlitt, whose *The Conquest of Poverty* echoes the Shaw he denounces as "shamelessly ignorant and silly" on economics in pointing out that "practically everybody concede[s] that the State does have a right to seize from Peter to pay Paul, when it levies necessary taxes, say, on Peter, a businessman, to pay Paul, a policeman" rather than asking "whether or not Paul is performing necessary and legitimate services in return for payment."

One might expect Hazlitt to have reacted to Matthew Josephson's *The Robber Barons* with Gallagher's snideness, seeing them as unjustly unloved Übermenschen who instead deserve to be lionized on Ayn Rand book covers. Instead, Hazlitt's assessment for *The New York Times Book Review* found that by reading such surveys "we would understand our country much better than we do" than from what he quotes Progressive historians Charles and Mary Beard as calling the "shadow picture" of conventional histories that offer more on "politicians of minor rank" than business leaders. Even Rand's tomes offer a more critical view between their covers of many malevolent magnates, whether archetypal fictional antagonists or all too real, who rely on "the power of forced, unearned, economically unjustified privileges."

A history of actually existing capitalism that ignores the wide valleys between the highest peaks is as incomplete as an account of the Amazin' Mets which only touches on their 1969 and 1984 World Series wins. In contrast, an economy of free exchanges between Peter and Paul (or Paulette) is a win-win for everyone involved.

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